

Our Mission Responsibility to New Religious Movements

Changes are needed in churches, schools, missions agencies as well as ministries to New Religious Movements (NRMs) in order to reach the lost within these movements.

by Gordon R. Lewis

A strange thing happened to America on its way through the twentieth century. In the 1960s and 70s effective missionaries representing Eastern pantheistic religious and occult spiritualities reached anti-establishment multitudes. Having rejected whatever Christianity they encountered in their youth, they were attracted by promises of a new way to personal relaxation and world peace. The New Age Movement led by Maharishi Mahesh Yogi's Transcendental Meditation craze went far beyond anti-establishment groups attracting activists in every level of society who sought something more than secular humanism offered. Many religious people believed the publicity that TM was compatible with Christianity. To find inner serenity they were initiated and began doing TM in the AM and the PM. The technique may have helped some to identify with the impersonal cosmos, but it was not transcendent enough to make them acceptable to the living, holy Lord of all. They needed not TM but CM, distinctively Christian meditation.

A New Global Frontier

An eclectic New Age Movement rose like a mushroom cloud over Western civilization and its fall-out has made household words of formerly unfamiliar concepts: panthe-

ism, karma, reincarnation, spiritual evolution, and channeling (formerly, witchcraft). Many who may not regard themselves members of the New Age Movement, now live under the influence of pantheistic and occult assumptions in telecasts, movies, business seminars, horoscopes, health food stores, metaphysical and other book stores, psychic fairs, psychic hot lines, and alternative health procedures.

In 1993 at Chicago's Parliament of World Religions Robert Muller said "we are entering an age of universalism. Wherever you turn, one speaks about global education, global information, global communications—every profession on earth is now acquiring a global dimension. The whole humanity is becoming interdependent, is becoming one."¹ It considered a "Proposal to Evolve the Parliament of the World's Religions towards a United Nations of Religions." Others promoted "World Citizenship" and an "Inter-religious Federation for World Peace." An "Invitation to a Global Liturgy" sought to awaken, reconcile and unite the hearts and minds of the human family.

University religion departments and religious publications seem to feature more the far eastern religions than the Christian faith from the near east. Hence, in spite of the resurgence

of evangelical churches, schools and missions in the last half of the twentieth century, NRMs have exploded into a major people group unreached by the gospel of grace. The global computerized information age presents pioneer missions with a global frontier.

Why then are NRMs not more often in the news? The ideas of NRMs are in the fine print in many articles, but appear in the headlines only occasionally for several reasons: (1) Their challenges to the classical Christian worldview and way of life have become increasingly deceptive and effective. (2) Anti-theistic/christological/biblical teachings and occult practices have become commonplace in everyday western culture. So they are no longer news. (3) Evangelical church members want to hear little negative about others' religions, but only something positive and self-affirming. (4) Groups denying Christianity's core doctrines claim to be Christian and seek acceptance as Christian. If not, they claim at least to be compatible with or an enhancement of Christianity.

The Challenge

So the need for Christians to defend and proclaim a theistic world view, universal moral principles and the gospel of grace could not be more urgent. We repeatedly hear that "all religions teach the same thing." They

may have some of the moral law as yet unsurpassed, but the differences are greater than the Grand Canyon. Most NRMs do not distinguish God from the cosmos, non-negotiable moral principles from relative noses of wax, the gracious imputation of Christ's righteousness from justification by works, morality motivated by love from that motivated by fear and necessity or magic from relational spirituality. Evangelicals have one of the outstanding opportunities in history for helping people distinguish authentic Christianity from its misconceptions in alternative religions.

We praise God for the independent agencies that have arisen to meet the challenge of NRMs that churches and missions agencies have been so slow to meet. Much more needs urgently to be done. Tragically, the non-Christian impact of NRMs remain untargeted in many theology textbooks, mission boards and churches. Until formal study of NRMs is brought into focus, the followers of these futile ways will remain lost and the causes of evangelical Christianity will suffer. Although increasing numbers of independent, parachurch apologists are able to unmask the NRM's erroneous worldviews and ways of life, few seem to give priority to evangelizing their devotees. Those who do may have little educational background for evaluating philosophical world views, doctrinal systems, ethical issues and alternative spiritualities. Hence it is crucial that leaders of outreach in every evangelical church and home mission board consider the thesis of this article:

The thesis of this article is three-fold. The challenge of the new global frontier to a Christian theistic world view and way of life in Western countries like America is so great that we cannot leave outreach to their adherents to amateurs and part timers. (1) Individuals who are gifted, well-

educated, accredited, full time, professional missionaries must be sent by their churches and mission boards to reach the lost in NRMs. (2) Church missions committees and mission agencies need to pray, give and send missionaries to reach the unreached under the influence of NRMs. (3) Existing independent countercult ministries need to become more closely related to a church and a home mission board. As difficult as that may seem, there would be mutual benefit. In the present age the pre-eminent institution through which God is working with His people to edify them and make them a blessing to the whole world is the church Christ founded and sustains.² Becoming more closely related to the churches has been beneficial to other parachurch organizations. Campus outreach ministries, for example, which have found the relationship of mutual benefit.

A New Designation

A minister or missionary holds fast to the faithful Word in order by sound doctrine to achieve two primary ends: (1) to encourage the saints, and (2) to refute opponents of the faith (Titus 1:9). Many ministries feature one or the other to the detriment. Those who think it unpopular to refute error contribute to the rise of naiveté concerning NRMs. Those who are exclusively focused on refutation of falsehood may contribute to negativism and despair.

The connotation of "countercult" is too negative to represent missionary's loving outreach to unreached people in need of the good news of God's grace. It is not enough for evangelical leaders primarily to react against non-Christian religious worldviews, epistemologies and ethics. We need to present a better way. Missions to Muslims would not call themselves CounterMuslims. This plays into the

hands of those who dismiss any, even well-reasoned refutation of their views, as anti-Mormon, anti-Muslim, etc. This article proposes that the half truth of the "countercult" ministry be deleted from the headlines and that evangelicals in ministry to NRMs think of themselves primarily as "missionaries" and their organization as missions. Missionaries must research and answer the truth claims of unrealistic world views, their illegitimate sources of knowledge and the faulty designs of their lifestyles. Missionaries need also to remove unnecessary roadblocks to faith. Their primary and ultimate *raison d'être* is to lead people influenced by NRMs to belief of the gospel, exclusive reliance on the one Mediator, Jesus Christ, and to a new orientation of life related to a sound and vital evangelical church.

In this day of unparalleled evangelical opportunity among those deceived by spiritual counterfeits, missionaries accountable to their boards and churches will demonstrate a more wholesome spiritual experience and way of life than lone ranger Christians with negative priorities. Above all, missionaries lead zealously religious sinners to bury their old way of life at the Messiah's cross and leave its tomb empty in the vitality of a new Spirit-given life from above.

Problem Areas

Although the need for evangelical missions to NRMs is enormous and growing, it is easy to be skeptical about their future for several reasons. (1) The priority of many countercult ministries is almost exclusively on the bad news rather than the good news. (2) Countercult ministries continue generally to be in financial jeopardy, often existing without church and mission board support. (3) The leaders, though wonderfully dedicated people, may be insufficiently trained biblically, logically, morally and spiri-

tually in Christian colleges and seminaries. (4) Church members seem more motivated to pray and give for missionaries on other continents than for those in their homeland. (5) Leaders of independent ministries often have strong personalities with years of experience and deep convictions that make it hard to work together with others with different convictions even on secondary matters of strategy and methods. It is understandable, but unfortunate that people with few highly prized loyalties can work together easier than those with many deeply valued loyalties, even on secondary matters of strategy and methods.

Have you heard the story of the six shipwrecked sailors? They were on an island for a long time and decided they should worship. Two were Southern Baptists who built a lean-to and worshipped together there. Two were New Agers who built a shed and channeled messages together there. Two were evangelical cult researchers who could not cooperate. They built two different huts and worshipped separately. From their distant locations they continued to publish articles against each other's approach!

Will internal strife destroy cooperative evangelical missions to the cults? While the house is being burglarized, will the watch dogs become attack dogs at each other's throats? To change the analogy, will their "friendly fire" shoot each other down? Deeply disturbing was the news during the Gulf War that a United States plane was shot down. By "friendly fire" several trained, skilled, healthy defenders of our country were needlessly killed and millions of dollars were destroyed. Even more distressing, however, would be news that evangelical cult ministries had been shot down by "friendly fire!" What a

tragedy if members mistakenly destroyed the worthy ministries of other well-trained, skilled defenders of the faith!

Nevertheless, I believe there are good reasons for anticipating a bright future for Christian missions to the NRMs—the John the Baptists of the new global frontier.

Evangelistic Priority

Those missions to NRMs will flourish in the future whose leaders focus, not on the penultimate goal of refutation, but on the ultimate priority of presenting the Good News.

The apostle Paul was commis-

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sioned by Christ to do the work of an evangelist among the religious Jews and Gentiles. An excellent, well-educated researcher and great defender of the faith, Paul was the paradigm missionary-evangelist to zealous Jews and religious Gentiles. But Paul was not a Lone Ranger. He was sent out by a local church at Antioch and responsibly returned to it to report on his ministry (Acts 14:26-28). The church that checked and confirmed his character and gifts stood behind him in need. He was accountable primarily as a missionary evangelist who also did pre-evangelism (apologetics), and rehabilitation of people from their prior religious commitments to the Christian churches he planted. He fed young Christians, taught sound doctrine and defended the faith against its influential opponents. Leaders of ministries

to NRMs today may have many subspecialties, but above all, must see themselves as sent by the Lord, like Paul, to evangelize the lost.

The late Francis Schaeffer, an exceptionally effective communicator and defender of the faith, did not want to be called an "apologist." An interviewer asked, "You have been described in many ways. How do you view yourself, as a theologian, a philosopher, or a cultural historian?" Schaeffer replied,

My interest is evangelism. To evangelize in the twentieth century, one has to operate across the whole spectrum of disciplines and have answers for the questions. I think we often sell Christianity short, not putting forth the richness we have in Christ for the total culture and the total intellectual life. Evangelism, then, is two things: first of all, giving honest answers to honest questions to get the blocks out of the way so that people will listen to the Gospel as a viable alternative and then secondly, showing them what Christianity means across the whole spectrum of life.³

Schaeffer fully recognized the penultimate need in many cases for pre-evangelism (or apologetics). But he held that the ultimate *telos* or goal of defending the objective validity of the faith was to persuade sinners of their need personally to accept its subjective validity for them. He preferred to be called an evangelist. Missionaries to NRMs could well identify themselves as evangelists, defined as broadly as Schaeffer defined it.

Our Lord himself commissioned us to make disciples of all people groups in all nations. If we eliminated those committed to NRMs in the West, the mission field would be small indeed. In the process of reaching those in NRMs, evangelists often need to do apologetics, or as Schaeffer aptly

called it, pre-evangelism. But our primary identity ought not to be mere apologists, theologians, philosophers, psychologists, sociologists, cult watchers, heresy hunters, or watchmen. Our primary designation should be that of evangelists whose primary goal is going out on a mission from a church Christ came to build to make disciples to grow that kind of church to become a blessing to the world.

How does the Lausanne Covenant define evangelism?

To evangelize is to spread the good news that Jesus Christ died for our sins and was raised from the dead according to the Scriptures, and that as the reigning Lord he now offers forgiveness of sins, and the liberating gift of the Spirit to all who repent. Our Christian presence in the world is indispensable to evangelism, and so is that kind of dialogue whose purpose is to listen sensitively in order to understand. But evangelism itself is the proclamation of the historical, biblical Christ as Savior and Lord, with a view to persuading people to come to him personally and so be reconciled to God. In issuing the gospel invitation we have no liberty to conceal the cost of discipleship. Jesus still calls all who would follow him to deny themselves, take up their cross, and identify themselves with his new community. The results of evangelism include obedience to Christ, incorporation into his Church and responsible service in the world.

Yes, by all worthy means we must summons people to repent and transfer their allegiance from counterfeit spiritual masters. But our distinctive message is that of a theistic world and life view (Heb. 11:6), morally principled living (Rom. 2:14-15) and the good news of the Gospel for the unjust (all). The primary reason for the existence of an evangelical approach to NRMs rests in our belief in the dynamite of the gospel. Power encounters occur as the Holy Spirit uses missionaries who, motivated by love for God and the lost, present Spirit-endued gospel truth with understanding to the spe-

cific interest and need of a devout sinner. The future will be bright for ministries that not only teach the gospel but exhibit the joy of fellowship with Christ and his people in the multifaceted ministries of a Christian church.

Missionary Identity

Evangelical ministers to NRMs will remain alive and well insofar as they change their primary identity from mere counter cult agents to missionaries—frontier type missionaries to unreached people in alternative religions and cults.

Missionary and church leaders defend the truth in order to evangelize and edify those who seek salvation in the wrong places. Missionaries stand up for truth, not as an end in itself, but as an instrument of the Spirit who brings sinners to the Savior and builds them up in the church. The goal of missionaries to NRMs is not just to educate Christians, to expose error, or to pronounce groups heretical in doctrine and/or aberrant in practice. Missionaries have a higher calling. They lovingly refute error and defend the objective validity of the gospel for the primary end of leading people to Christ and his new community which is to bless the whole world.

As long ago as 1980 the Lausanne Committee on World Evangelization recognized outreach to people in the cults as missions. At that Consultation on World Evangelization in Pattaya, Thailand, leaders divided the mission field, not geographically, but targeted unreached people groups. I was invited to participate in the working group on "Mystics and Cultists."

The missionaries and national leaders in that small group were concerned about very different cults and some wanted to take approaches that were primarily sociological, anthropological, theological, biblical or philosophical. Eventually we came to value

each other's strengths and a pamphlet was produced representative of majority views. Not all were happy with the entire document, but the faltering attempts at reconciliation rather than confrontation were worthwhile.

At the closing plenary session, participants were movingly challenged to continue interacting with other missionaries in our respective continents. In response to that challenge, the idea of Evangelical Ministries to New Religions (EMNR) was conceived. I presented the possibility of a more continuous cooperation among ministries to the cults in North America at a cults conference to advance Christian missions by strategic planning, mutual encouragement, and shared experiences. After a year or two of consideration, several signed up as charter members, affirming their agreement with the Lausanne Covenant. About half of the doctrinal and missionary platform in the Lausanne Covenant is explicitly devoted to evangelism. Statement headings include the Uniqueness and Universality of Christ, the Nature of Evangelism, the Church and Evangelism, Cooperation in Evangelism, the Urgency of the Evangelistic Task, etc.

Thus EMNR was conceived in the context of a missions Consultation explicitly devoted to evangelizing unreached people. EMNR members, who concur with the Lausanne Covenant, do not do so sincerely if they are mere cult watchers, debaters, bad news gatherers or investigative reporters. Let each associated individual and organization feature their positive identity as missionaries open to dialogue as well as proclamation. Let their name and the headlines of their promotional materials communicate that their ultimate objective is missions to convey the good news to religious groups unreached by the gospel of grace and ministries of the church.

In the context of the Lausanne Committee on World Evangelism, full-orbed missions is the evangelical cult minister's major *raison d'être*.

It is great to see that the Southern Baptist Home Missions Society has its Interfaith Witness. Reaching people with non-theistic and non-Christian religious beliefs is there headlined, as it ought to be everywhere, as the task of a home missions agency.

In 1989, at my recommendation, the Conservative Baptist Home Mission Society, now Mission to the Americas, began sending qualified missionaries to reach New Agers. The first, Bill Honsberger, now serves in the Boulder-Denver area.

The present article constitutes a similar proposal to other denominational and non-denominational mission boards officially to send forth laborers into this whitened harvest field. How foolish it would be to wait until 51% of our country holds many of same non-Christian convictions as Hindus and Buddhists! Perceptive leaders of home mission boards will discern the need before them.

With all the avenues of outreach available to evangelicals in this day of exceptional opportunity, we neglect this unreached field to our own loss. Annually we lose gifted young people, church members, potential missionaries and many resources to NRMs. To preserve the present base of support for mission agencies, it would be in the self-interest of mission boards to send missionaries to the NRMs. Mission boards need not start from point zero. They can seek out independent ministries to NRMs and propose cooperative relationships. They can approach the colleges and seminaries to train people for this work.

How can an independent NRM ministry implement its identity as a

mission? (1) It could seek out a home mission society with which to cooperate. (2) It could become an accredited agency of it as a special task force. (3) It could become an evangelical home mission society with a specific target--NRMs--and include "mission" in its name. The context in which God has promised to give lasting fruit to full-orbed missionaries calls for their major goal as that of doing pre-evangelism, evangelism and rehabilitation to the church.

An evangelical missionary to NRMs should display proven ability to understand and communicate a coherent account of the relevant lines of biblical teaching on a given subject.

How will missions to NRMs survive financially? When independent or parachurch cult ministries place themselves in the context of the mission of the church to the world and their services to others merit it, the needed support comes in. As we serve others in the name and spirit of our Lord, they in turn minister gratefully to us. The potential for support in the church mission budgets is greater than that of individuals. Mission committee members in local churches can respond to the challenge of this article by teaching the members that missions to NRMs are biblical and urgent.

As home mission agencies, those researching, speaking and witnessing would need to meet and maintain standard educational requirements and would benefit by regular accountability to their mission agency's board. As missionaries doing evangelism, pre-evangelism and rehabilitation to the churches, we have distinct and varied gifts, specializations and

strategies. With all our variables, we are sent by the Lord through a church to cooperate as a team along with many other missionaries.

Biblical Qualifications

Ministries to NRMs will not be in jeopardy if their leaders possess the integrity required of church leaders and missionaries in general.

To help trustees of mission boards and churches, a check list of qualities was given by inspiration in 1 Tim. 3 and Titus 1. Ordination councils and mission boards need to apply these biblical requirements today to those who would evangelize in a pluralistic culture of NRMs.

In moral character a pastor/evangelist/missionary is to be husband of one wife, that is to keep his vow of faithfulness to his wife. He is faithful also to teach his children in the nurture and admonition of the Lord. If he cannot extend his faith in his family, how shall he do so as an ambassador of his church?

What other traits of character predominate? I quote, "Since an overseer is entrusted with God's work, he must be blameless--not overbearing, not quick-tempered, not given to much wine, not violent, not pursuing dishonest gain." An agent of the Holy Spirit himself exhibits self-control, uprightness, holiness and self-discipline" (Titus 1:7-8). The fruit of the Holy Spirit's presence are to be in evidence.

In personality, a missionary is hospitable and loves all that is good (Titus 1:8). His interests should be much broader than the NRMs as he loves all the good gifts God gives. For all good things are ours to dedicate to Christ and God (1 Cor. 3:22-23).

In experience, a leader of evangelical ministries to alternative religions ought to be a mature member of his

church. He "must not be a recent convert, or he may become conceited and fall under the same judgment as the devil" (1 Tim.3:6). Also the missionary has earned "a good reputation with outsiders, so that he will not fall into disgrace and into the devil's trap" (v. 7).

An evangelical missionary to NRMs should display proven ability to understand and communicate a coherent account of the relevant lines of biblical teaching on a subject, holds firmly to the trustworthy message as it has been taught so that he can encourage others by sound doctrine and refute those who oppose it" (Titus 1:9). It is not enough to proclaim merely a positive or merely a negative message. An evangelical missionary is able both to encourage the saints and to refute the teachings of unbelievers. It is well for doctrinal statements to affirm what is believed and to deny what is therefore regarded as untrue to reality and normative morality.

If the qualifications of an elder-bishop-pastor seem too much to expect of missionaries to cultists, consider those of a deacon.

Deacons, likewise, are to be men worth respect, sincere, not indulging in much wine, and not pursuing dishonest gain. They must keep hold of the deep truths of the faith with a clear conscience. They must first be tested; and then if there is nothing against them, let them serve as deacons. In the same way their wives are to be women worthy of respect, not malicious talkers but temperate and trustworthy in everything (1 Tim. 3:8-10).

The antecedents for deacons are hardly less demanding. The apostles chose Stephen as a servant or deacon because he was "a man full of faith, and of the Holy Spirit" (Acts 6:5) "full of grace and power" (v. 8). Opponents "could not stand up against his wisdom or the Spirit by which he spoke" (v. 10). No missionary attains perfection, but it seems reasonable that

substantial indications of the qualifications for office in the church ought to be maintained for any Christian leader in outreach from Christian churches.

Insofar as NRM researchers expect these qualifications in their pastors and international missionaries, they must require them of their own selves. We may have the glowing recommendations of others, but we will receive a sincere letter of recommendation from the Lord only if we display the qualities of character, personality, experience, giftedness and spirituality required in 1 Timothy 3 and Titus 1.

One's defense of the faith is to honor Jesus Christ, one's King, Head and Lord. Various pamphlets from cult ministries quote a sound bite from 1 Peter 3:15 "Be ready always to give an answer, a reason for the hope that is in you." It is always encouraging to find people obedient to that exhortation. But in the context, our reasoned defense is fruitful when yielded to the Lordship of Christ. Before defending the faith Peter says, "In your hearts set apart Jesus as Lord." If we ourselves are not to become cultic, our ultimate concern ought not be for our kingdom, but Christ's kingdom. We all must bow to the Lordship of Christ. The head of our missionary agency, as well as any other branch of the church, is the risen Lord Jesus Christ in all his exalted power and glory.

How, Peter, should we relate to those we would reach with the truth? Relationally, "do this with gentleness and respect" (v. 16). However damaged by sin, every devotee of a cult remains an image-bearer of God. So each has inherent worth and inalienable human rights. Each is to be respected and deserves to be treated as justly and caringly as we would be treated. Each cultist needs to be loved as potentially a child of God, as broth-

ers and sisters in our churches.

We are to be more concerned with winning people than arguments. "Don't have anything to do with foolish and stupid arguments, because you know they produce quarrels. And the Lord's servant must not quarrel; instead, he must be kind to everyone, able to teach, not resentful. Those who oppose him he must gently instruct, in the hope that God will grant them repentance leading them to a knowledge of the truth, and that they will come to their senses and escape from the trap of the devil, who has taken them captive to do his will" (2 Tim. 2:23-26).

If when reaching out to the lost we display the spirit of Christ, how much more should we display Christ's spirit in relating to believers with the same mission. The future of missions to NRMs will be bright if our identity, our mission and God's requirements are in sharp focus. Churches, mission boards and committees need seriously to implement such qualifications.

Self-giving Love

Paraphrasing and applying 1 Cor. 13, we may have the largest, most productive outreach to cultists in the world, but if we have not love for God and our brothers and sisters who minister by a different strategy, our voices are like clanging cymbals (v. 1). We may have the most extensive knowledge of true and false doctrine ever, but if we have not love, we are nothing (v. 2). If we give everything we own to ministries to NRMs, but have not love, we gain nothing (v. 3).

Please apply this passage to your relationship to colleagues in similar ministries as well as unreached people groups.

Love is patient, love is kind. It does not envy, it does not boast, it is not proud. It is not rude, it is not self-seeking, it is not easily angered, it keeps no record of wrongs. Love does

not delight in evil but rejoices with the truth. It always protects, always trusts, always hopes, always perseveres. Love never fails... And now these three remain: faith, hope and love. But the greatest of these is love (vv. 4-13). May the Lord forgive us who repent for being impatient, unkind, envious, boastful, angry or rude to each other and those we would reach!

What does God want from us most of all? Above all, God wants our love! That is the great commandment of the whole Old Testament. Love the God who transcends all the griefs of time with all your heart, soul, strength and mind. And what secondly does God desire of missionaries? By God's grace, love your relatives, friends and neighbors. Love those who need Christ in world religions and cults.

What do you say to a Hare Krishna at the airport? Walter Martin facetiously suggested one time, that we grab them by the lapels, shake them and say, "Why don't you go get a job? You are parasites on this society." In cases needing an existential shock treatment, that may be the loving thing to do. Others may need a less confrontive approach.

When I taught in India I learned that the beggars think they are doing you a service. They give you a chance to earn good karma by contributing to them. So why not say to the Hare Krishna, "I appreciate the fact that you want to help me earn good karma by buying your magazine. Do you realize that I have perfect karma? I have the perfectly righteous status of the Lord Jesus Christ. And you can have Christ's perfect karma put to your account. Renounce trust in your good karma and by faith receive the gift of Christ's perfect righteousness. Then you will have the righteousness that comes from God as a free gift.

We are to love our brothers and

sisters in the churches, even those who don't know and don't care about the world religions and cults! Do we love our colleagues in their varied ministries to NRMs? Would that observers of our lives and teams of missionaries might be able to say, "How the Christian missionaries to NRMs loved each other!"

How can we say that we love God if we cannot love our neighbors— even those believers in the Lausanne Covenant who are also on a mission to reach cultists? If we can mature in love for the team of missionaries with a similar calling, we will grow in effectiveness. And if we love the redemptive kingdom now manifest most prominently in the church, including the one we joined, our witness to outsiders will be enhanced.

Mission Cooperation

With a little imagination one could predict the collapse of the young, first century church at Corinth. Once a vibrant fellowship of repentant sinners, they were being torn apart with "quarreling" (1 Cor. 3:3). One said, "I follow Paul." Another, "I follow Apollos," but these were not the head of the church, they were "mere men" (v. 4).

Whatever organization we serve, and whatever our high regard for its gifted leader, we have a higher loyalty. "What, after all, is Apollos? And what is Paul? Only servants, through whom you came to believe—as the Lord has assigned to each his task. I planted the seed, Apollos watered it, but God made it grow" (vv. 5-6).

Are we followers of Walter Martin? Hank Hanegraaff, Paul Martin, the Passantinos, Robert Morey, James Spencer, Norman Geisler, the Jesus People, Ronald Enroth?

Do not deceive yourselves. If any one of you thinks he is wise by the standards of this age, he should become a "fool" so that he may become wise. For the wisdom of

this world is foolishness in God's sight. As it is written, 'He catches the wise in their craftiness'... So then, no more boasting about men! All things are yours, whether Paul or Apollos, or Cephas or the world or life or death or the present or the future—all are yours, and you are of Christ and Christ is of God (1 Cor. 3:18-21).

We can profit from the writings of people as different as Walter Martin, Anthony Hoekema, Ruth Tucker, Gordon Lewis and Craig Blomberg. We need not reject the contributions of one to profit from the values of the other except where they contradict the teaching of Christ and Scripture. For all are Christ's and all are ours insofar as they teach and exemplify truth. But all are finite and fallible and so we must not make them our rule of faith or fellowship.

An occupational hazard of apologists is to use gifts God gave us for defending the faith to defend ourselves. Fallaciously we may imagine that since the Bible is inerrant we are. A converted Catholic priest in my classes admitted that as a priest he said, "The pope is infallible on a few matters on which popes have spoken *ex cathedra*, but in my town I was infallible on everything else!" Since the Bible alone is without error, defenders of biblical inerrancy should be the first to acknowledge their own fallibility.

The future of missions to NRMs will be bright, if having unity in the essentials (such as those in the Lausanne Covenant), we allow liberty on non-essential methods and exude charity toward all our colleagues. With confidence in the integrity of each other's mature allegiance to Christ as Savior and Lord, we should be able to abide our distinctive differences of personality, gifts, strategies and methods.

An integration of the elements of truth in the work of our colleagues is more appropriate than blanket

endorsement of one against all others. For example, in my book *Testing Christianity's Truth Claims*, I found value in the data of the inductive method of reasoning of a Norman Geisler or a John Warwick Montgomery. I integrated the logical elements of a rational empiricist like Stuart Hackett, or of a rationalist like Gordon Clark. I appreciated and used the content of Cornelius Van Til's presuppositions. I incorporated the personal witness of Christian mystics. All were integrated in the valid elements of each in a verificational approach.⁴

In spite of real strategic differences, all who can affirm the Lausanne Covenant can respect, love and cooperate with each other. Although we have our different mentors, we must remember that they are all mere men and we can learn from all insofar as all are of Christ. As Paul said, "all are yours"!

Self-Government

Paul's swan song to the elders from the cult center of Ephesus, started out with "Guard yourselves" (Acts 20:28). If we govern ourselves we will not need so much to be governed by others. Paul warned that ravaging wolves were coming and would deceive many. But in such a time, he said, first, stand guard over your own self.

In addition to guarding the gospel message, we need to guard our own doctrinal and moral integrity. We must keep ourselves in the love of God, maintaining moral and spiritual health by daily dedication to the cause of Christ. Let us not become so busy cataloging the errors of others that we fail to heed admonitions to examine and control ourselves. As good as we may be doing at self-governing, none of us sees ourselves as others see us. So we need accountability to others and particularly to our own boards.

A *Christianity Today* article was headed, "Who is watching the cult watchers?" If we were more open to responsible self-criticism and that of one another by the mission boards of our churches, we might not need to be watched by others. Missionaries to the NRMs deplore the damage to the cause done by leaders of the cults and of failed television ministries who have been unaccountable to their boards. If we have called for greater accountability on their part, should we not acknowledge our need for greater accountability to our churches and our mission boards? Regularly, we must examine whether in our ministries we have yielded to fleshly efforts or whether they are a fruit of the Spirit's work in the body of Christ and our board of trustees.

In the moral and spiritual battle for truth we need to choose our battles and our weapons carefully.

"Though we live in the world, we do not wage war as the world does. The weapons we fight with are not the weapons of the world. On the contrary, they have divine power to demolish strongholds. We demolish arguments and every pretension that sets itself up against the knowledge of God, and we take captive every thought to make it obedient to Christ" (2 Cor. 10:3-5).

Dysfunctional families often use the wrong weapons to resolve their differences. How great must be God's concern with his dysfunctional church family when we also choose the world's weapons to settle our disagreements.

According to a very apocryphal story, a person who recently went to heaven saw a cloud floating by with people excitedly praising God, shouting Hallelujah, raising both hands and exclaiming, Praise the Lord! Peter explained, "There go the charismatics."

Another cloud sailed by with dig-

nified people who sang old hymns, but did not raise hands in worship. Peter explained, that they were the Presbyterians.

A third cloud went by with a group of battle weary cult watchers. Peter said "Sh! Don't say anything. The others didn't think any counter-cult people would get here."

But I believe that evangelical missionaries to the cults and the churches supporting them will be there. I recall what the glorified Lord said to the church in Ephesus through John,

I know your deeds, your hard work and your perseverance. I know that you cannot tolerate wicked men, that you have tested those who claim to be apostles but are not, and have found them false. You have persevered and have endured hardships for my name, and have not grown weary. Yet I hold this against you: You have forsaken your first love. Remember the height from which you have fallen! Repent and do the things you did at first. If you do not repent, I will come to you and remove your lampstand from its place. But you have this in your favor, You hate the practices of the Nicolaitans, which I also hate. He who has an ear to hear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches (Rev. 2:2-7)

In Conclusion

Let us remember our first love and our first spiritual weapons when we were so dependent on the Holy Spirit. As Martin Luther King memorably said, "I have a dream." so too I have a dream that in this day of unparalleled global opportunity, evangelicals will be known primarily as missionary evangelists, gifted and qualified, supported by schools and mission boards to lovingly and cooperatively minister faithfully to those living under the influence of NRMs.⁵

I have a dream that together missionaries to NRMs will make a significant contribution to the cause of Christ that cannot be made by any of our agencies separately.

I have a dream that evangelical churches will regularly support these qualified missionary evangelists.

I have a dream that severe personal differences among missionaries will be transcended by the holy love of God's Spirit faithfully shed abroad in our hearts, convicting of sin, urging people to confess and to embrace each other in forgiveness.

Endnotes

1. Cited by Elliot Miller, "The 1993 Parliament of the World's Religions: Part One: Interreligious Dialogue or New Age Rally?" *Christian Research Journal* 16,2 (Fall 1993), 1
2. See the role of the Church in God's program, Lewis and Demarest, *Integrative Theology*, vol. 3, chapter 5, and especially chapter 6 on the Church and Israel in God's Kingdom.
3. *Christianity Today* (8 October, 1976): 20 [18]. Cited in my "Schaeffer's Apologetic Method" ed. Ronald W. Ruggesegger, *Reflections on Francis Schaeffer*. Academie, 1986, pp. 75.76.
4. Gordon R. Lewis, *Testing Christianity's Truth Claims* (Lanham, MD: University Press of America), 1990.
5. Also see my "The Church and the New Spirituality" in the *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society*, 19, 2 Fall 1996

Photo here
of
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